

# DNA from poached moose extends long arm of law in refuge

*by Chris Johnson*

I recently taught a class at the National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia for new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Law Enforcement Officers. To liven up the class, I related a moose-poaching case from the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, where I had made some instructive mistakes but still came out alright.

Several students told me that they thought the case was fascinating and that others might like to hear about it.

On a late August afternoon several years ago, I was patrolling Swan Lake Road, and I contacted a hunter. During the course of our conversation he told me that the night before, just after dark, he had witnessed two guys in a red and white Blazer shoot a moose just west of the Silver Lake pullout on Swanson River Road on the edge of the large swamp. He said he did not see the moose antlers, just the body of the moose.

Earlier that morning, I had observed a red and white Blazer, parked near the Silver Lake pullout, and I had recorded the license and location in my notebook. When I came back that afternoon, the Blazer was gone. I attempted to locate the kill site, but did not find it.

Two weeks later, I ran into the hunter who had told me about the men in the Blazer shooting the moose after dark. He asked me if I had ever found that moose kill that he had told me about earlier. I told him I hadn't, and he said that after he talked to me, he had gone back to the kill site and found that the men had left a front quarter and a set of ribs. He then salvaged the meat and took it home.

He said, "The only thing left at the kill site was a gut pile and one front leg from the distal joint to the hoof."

He then gave me better directions on where to find the kill site. He had not reported his find to anybody because he had picked up the abandoned moose meat. With the better directions, I found the site. There was an old gut pile and one moose leg from the distal joint down. I collected tissue samples.

I did a vehicle registration check on the red and white Blazer license that I had recorded in my note-

book. I went to the registered owners' residence and discovered that they had sold the vehicle that summer. However, they were able to help me identify the new owner of the vehicle.

I went to the residence listed for my new suspect. When I got there, I found out that he had moved out a short time before. While I was at the former residence of the suspect, a red and white Blazer pulled into the driveway next door. I questioned both subjects together.

This was my first mistake, as I pointed out to the new student officers. It gave both men a chance to work out their stories together. They said that they had shot a moose on Swanson River Road earlier in the season. The location and other details they gave were consistent with the information I had at the time.

They claimed that they shot a small bull moose and had left the antlers in the field. They also claimed to have taken all the meat out and said some things that led me to believe they were not being entirely truthful with me. I asked them if I could get a meat sample from the moose, and they told me that all the meat was in Homer. They said they would get me a sample.

This was my second mistake. I should have gotten a search warrant for the meat at this time.

Two weeks went by, and the hunters still had not delivered the meat sample. I called them again, and they said they did not know when they would get to Homer for the meat.

An hour after talking to them, one of the men called and said that he had picked up the meat and wanted to drop off a sample. I found it a little strange that they all of a sudden had the meat with them. Anyway, I took their meat sample, and the samples from the hunter who had picked up the front quarter, and my sample from the kill site, and sent them all to the National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory in Ashland, Oregon.

The forensics lab is the only full-service wildlife forensics laboratory in the world. The lab can make species identification, gender identification and even can identify individual animals by DNA "fingerprint-

ing” of body tissues submitted for evidence by federal, state and international wildlife law enforcement agencies. The lab works just like a police crime lab, matching the suspect, the victim and the crime scene through examination of physical evidence of all types. The forensics lab concluded through DNA analysis and serology examination that all three samples were from moose. My sample collected from the kill site and the sample taken from the front quarter picked up by the reporting hunter came from the same animal—a cow moose. The sample given by the suspects came from a bull moose.

At the time I thought this was the end of my case, but the story continues.

Five months later, while on routine patrol on the Kenai River near the inlet to Skilak Lake, I observed the suspects from the moose case camping and fishing. I observed one of the suspects take a package of meat wrapped in freezer paper out of his backpack and start cooking the meat. The camper proceeded to make chili.

After their meal, the campers broke camp and dumped the remaining, uneaten chili on the ground. I then collected the meat from the chili. I sent samples of the meat to the forensics lab to be compared with the previous samples. The lab concluded through DNA analysis that the chili meat was a cow moose. They further concluded that the chili meat was from the same cow moose as the samples collected from the kill site on Swanson River Road and the meat from the front quarter picked up by the hunter.

There were several mistakes made in this investigation that almost closed the case, but with a little luck and some good DNA, I was able to muddle through it. I issued citations, the fines were paid, and lessons were learned by all involved, not the least being myself.

*Chris Johnson is a law enforcement officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*